

Voluntary Simplicity — Part 1

By Duane Elgin, author of *Voluntary Simplicity* & Arnold Mitchell

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While working for the think-tank, Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International), Duane Elgin co-authored the following report with Arnold Mitchell in 1976 for the Business Intelligence Program. Titled *Voluntary Simplicity*, this was the most popular report published to that date by the program and it stirred national interest in the theme of simplicity. This article is an updated version of that catalytic report and was published in the Summer, 1977 issue of the *Co-Evolution Quarterly* (which, in turn, was published by the *Whole Earth Catalog*).

I. Introduction

For the past several years the popular press has paid occasional attention to stories of people returning to the simple life — of people moving back to the country or making their own bread or building their own solar-heated home, and so on. Beneath this popular image of simple living we think there is a major social movement afoot which has the potential of touching the United States and other developed nations to their cores. This is the movement towards "voluntary simplicity" — a phrase we have borrowed from Richard Gregg who, in 1936, was describing a way of life marked by a new balance between inner and outer growth. Further, we think that voluntary simplicity may prove an increasingly powerful economic, social, and political force over the coming decade and beyond if large numbers of people of diverse backgrounds come to see it as a workable and purposeful response to many of the critical problems that we face. The emergence of voluntary simplicity could represent a major transformation of traditional American values. In this context, it may be a harbinger of multifold shifts, not only in values, but in consumption patterns, institutional operations, social movements, national policies, and so on.

Although there are many precursors and contributing streams to this social flow (environmentalism, consumerism, consciousness movement, etc.), there is little direct evidence to measure the magnitude of this way of life. This discussion then is *not* intended to be predictive or definitive; rather, as social conjecture and pattern recognition, it is inherently speculative and intended to provoke further thought and comment regarding voluntary simplicity.

In this paper, we start with a definition of voluntary simplicity (which we will sometimes refer to as VS) and look at the goals and values of people espousing it. We next discuss who the VS people are, their living patterns, and plausible trends in VS out to the year 2000. The paper then discusses the social and business implications of VS.

II. What Is Voluntary Simplicity?

The essence of voluntary simplicity is living in a way what is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This way of life embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale, and an intention to realize our higher human potential — both psychological and spiritual — in community with others. The driving forces behind voluntary simplicity range from acutely personal concerns to critical national problems. The appeal of simple living appears to be extraordinarily widespread, even gathering sympathy from among those who are not presently attempting to simplify their own life patterns. Voluntary simplicity is important because it may foreshadow a major transformation in the goals and values of the United States in the coming decades. Although a social movement still in its early stages, its practical and ethical positions seem well enough developed to permit useful analysis of this way of life.

Voluntary simplicity is not new. Nonetheless, the conditions and trends which appear to be driving its contemporary emergence do seem new in their magnitude and intensity. Historically, voluntary simplicity has its roots in the legendary frugality and self-reliance of the Puritans; in Thoreau's naturalistic vision at Walden Pond; in Emerson's spiritual and practical plea for "plain living and high thinking;" in the teachings and social philosophy of a number of spiritual leaders such as Jesus and Gandhi.

A uniquely modern aspect of voluntary simplicity is that this way of life seems to be driven by a sense of urgency and social responsibility that scarcely existed ten or fifteen years ago. This sense of urgency appears to derive from many serious societal problems, including: the prospects of a chronic energy shortage; growing terrorist activities at the same time that developed nations seem increasingly vulnerable to disruption; growing demands of the less developed nations for a more equitable share of the world's resources; the prospect that before we run out of resources on any absolute basis we may poison ourselves to death with environmental contaminants; a growing social malaise and purposelessness which causes us to drift in our social evolution; and so on. These are but a few of the more modern elements which converge to make voluntary simplicity a seemingly rational response to a pressing situation.

Values Central To Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity is a name which denotes a social movement of great diversity and richness. Not surprisingly, there are many values congruent with voluntary simplicity — that radiate out, so to speak, touching global as well as close-to-home issues, idealistic as well as practical matters, and worldly along with personal concerns. Yet, there seems to be an underlying coherence to the rich diversity of expression of this way of life. Consequently, we have selected a skeletal list of those values, which seem to us to lie at the heart of this emerging way of life. These five values are the following:

- Material Simplicity
- Human Scale

- Self-Determination
- Ecological Awareness
- Personal Growth

These are considered in detail below.

1. Material Simplicity Simplification of the material aspects of life is one of the core values of voluntary simplicity. The American Friends Service Committee, long a leader in exploring a way of life of creative simplicity, defines simple living as a "non-consumerist life-style based upon being and becoming, not having." The Friends have identified four consumption criteria which evoke the essence of voluntary material simplicity:

- Does what I own or buy promote activity, self-reliance, and involvement, or does it induce passivity and dependence?
- Are my consumption patterns basically satisfying, or do I buy much that serves no real need?
- How tied are my present job and lifestyle to installment payments, maintenance and repair costs, and the expectations of others?
- Do I consider the impact of my consumption patterns on other people and on the earth?

These consumption criteria imply an intention to "reduce frills and luxuries in our present lifestyle but at the same time emphasize the beauty and joy of living." They are designed to (1) help people lead lives of creative simplicity, freed from excessive attachment to material goods; (2) aid the nation release more of its wealth to share with those who presently do not have even the basic necessities of life; (3) help individuals become more self-sufficient and less dependent upon large, complex institutions, whether public or private; and (4) restore to life a sense of proportion and balance between the material and non-material aspects of living.

Although living simply implies consuming quantitatively less (particularly items that are energy inefficient, nonbiodegradable, nonessential luxuries, etc.), this does not mean that the overall cost of consumption will go down drastically. Living simply need not be equated with living cheaply. The hand crafted, durable, esthetically enduring products that appeal to frugal consumers are oftentimes purchased at a considerable premium over mass-produced items. Therefore, although the quantity of consumption may decrease and the environmental costs of consumption may be considerably moderated, the overall cost of consumption may remain relatively high since our economy is not oriented to producing the kinds of products which fit these criteria. Material simplicity will thus likely be manifest in consumption styles that are less ascetic (of strictly enforced austerity) and more aesthetic (where each person will consider whether his or her level and pattern of consumption fits, with grace and integrity, into the practical art of daily living). In this view, material possessions are supportive of rather than central to, the process of human growth. Since the ways of expressing that growth are diverse, it

seems likely that the degree and nature of material simplification will be a matter for each individual to settle largely for him or herself.

2. Human Scale A preference for human-sized living and working environments is a central feature of the values constellation embraced by voluntary simplicity. Adherents to voluntary simplicity tend to equate the gigantic scale of institutions and living environments with anonymity, incomprehensibility, and artificiality.

In contrast, as E.F. Schumacher has so powerfully stated, "Small is Beautiful." The smallness theme touches on many facets of living. It implies that living and working environments as well as supportive institutions (which have grown to enormous levels of scale and complexity) should, whenever possible, be decentralized into more comprehensible and manageable entities. This further implies that people's endeavors should be of such dimensions that each knows what he/she contributes to the whole and, hence, has a sense of shared rewards and shared responsibility. Reduction of scale is seen as a means of getting back to basics by restoring to life a more human sense of proportion and perspective.

3. Self-Determination Voluntary simplicity embraces an intention to be more self-determining and less dependent upon large, complex institutions whether in the private sector (the economy) or public sector (the political processes). Self-determination manifests itself in consumption as a desire to assume greater control over one's personal destiny and not lead a life so tied to "installment payments, maintenance costs and the expectations of others." To counterbalance the trend towards increasing material dependency a person may seek to become more materially self-sufficient — to grow his own, to make his own, to do without, and to exercise self-discipline in his pattern and level of consumption so that the degree of dependency (both physical and psychological) is reduced.

Self-determination shows up in production as a counterbalancing force to combat excessive division of labor. Therefore, instead of embracing specialization the adherent to voluntary simplicity may seek greater work integration and synthesis so that the relationship between his work and its contribution to the whole is more evident.

In the public sector, the drive for greater self-determination is revealed by a growing distrust of and sense of alienation from large and complex social bureaucracies. The individual — particularly the adherent to voluntary simplicity — seems to want to take charge of his life more fully and to manage his own affairs without the undue or unnecessary intrusion of a remote bureaucracy. This dimension of voluntary simplicity may explain some of the unusual political coalitions that seem to be emerging between the right and left — where neither support the further intrusion of big institutions into their lives, but rather wish for greater local self-determination and grass roots political action. This aversion to being controlled by increasingly distant bureaucracies is reminiscent of the stubborn independence out of which was born the American Revolution.

4. Ecological Awareness A sense of ecological awareness which acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of people and resources is central to voluntary simplicity. There emerges from this awareness a number of themes that are hallmarks of this way of life. For example, ecological awareness prompts recognition that our earth is indeed limited, with all that implies for conservation of physical resources, reduction of environmental pollution, and maintenance of the beauty and integrity of the natural environment. Importantly, this awareness often seems to extend beyond a concern for purely physical resources to include other human beings as well. The philosophy of "welfare" espoused by Gandhi (sarvodaya — not wanting what the least of the inhabitants of this earth cannot have) seems to bring, in substantial part, from this intimate sense of felt connection with those who are less fortunate than we. From this awareness there may arise a sense of compassion and caring that extends beyond the boundaries of the nation-state to include all of humankind. In acknowledging the underlying unity of the human race, the growth of an ecological awareness expands the vision of voluntary simplicity outward and brings with it a strong sense of social responsibility and worldly involvement to what otherwise could be a relatively isolated and self-centered way of life.

Some of the more concrete expressions of this awareness might include: a willingness to share resources with those who are disadvantaged; a sense of global citizenship with commensurate adjustments in lifestyle, social vision, and political commitments; a preference for living where there is ready access to nature; and a desire to foster human and institutional diversity at a grass roots level.

5. Personal Growth For many persons taking up a materially simple way of life, the primary reason is to clear away external clutter so as to be freer to explore the "inner life." The themes of material simplicity, self-sufficiency, a more human scale to living and working, and an ecological awareness are, in a way, devices to sweep away impediments to inner growth. The goal, then, is to free oneself of the overwhelming externals so as to provide the space in which to grow — both psychologically and spiritually. Simone de Beauvoir succinctly stated the rationale for this desire for self-realization when she said: "Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying." From the vantage point of many adherents to voluntary simplicity, contemporary American society is primarily occupied in perpetuating itself — and living has become "only not dying." As the workability and meaning of traditional values and goals becomes less compelling, a small but rapidly growing number of Americans have become intensively engaged in the attempt to surpass themselves. Although personal growth often includes a distinctly spiritual aspect, involvement with the inner/nonmaterial dimension of life should not be associated with any particular philosophy or religion — its scope embraces activities ranging from biofeedback, humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, Eastern philosophy, fundamentalist Christianity, and more.

A concern for the subjective aspect of experience and for the quality of human relationships has been reflected in a steady current of evolving social trends over the past 15 years. Developments have included the emergence and proliferation of the

"human potential movement;" the emergence of "transpersonal psychology" coupled with a rapid increase of interest and involvement in many Eastern meditative traditions; the growth of feminism; a cultural fascination with psychic phenomena; developments in brain research that confirm a biological basis for both the rational and the intuitive side to human nature; a growing interest in sports as both a physical and spiritual process (e.g., the "inner game" of tennis); and more.

Without the compelling goal of exploring inner potentials, it seems unlikely that there will be sufficient motivation to adopt voluntarily a way of life of material simplicity. Without greater simplicity, it seems unlikely that we will be able to cope successfully with the problems engendered, for example, by scarcity. Finally, unless inner learning expands, it seems unlikely there will develop the degree of internal maturation necessary for the human species to act as wise trustees of conscious evolution on this earth.

Still, this analysis does not penetrate to the roots of the connection between personal growth and voluntary simplicity. To explain adequately, we must look to a deeper underlying vision. It is an old vision — perhaps as old as civilized man — but an enduring one that seems destined to be rediscovered again and again. The nature of this vision is succinctly summed up by the eminent historian, Arnold Toynbee:

These religious founders [Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tse, St. Francis of Assisi] disagreed with each other in their pictures of what is the nature of the universe, the nature of spiritual life, the nature of ultimate spiritual reality. But they all agreed in their ethical precepts. They all agreed that the pursuit of material wealth is a wrong aim. We should aim only at the minimum wealth needed to maintain life; and our main aim should be spiritual. They all said with one voice that if we made material wealth our paramount aim, this would lead to disaster. They all spoke in favor of unselfishness and of love for other people as the key to happiness and to success in human affairs.

The foregoing five themes do not exhaust the range of basic values that may emerge as hallmarks of the way of life termed voluntary simplicity. Moreover, these values will surely be held to differing degrees in differing combinations by different people. Nonetheless, these values possess an underlying coherence which suggests that they have not arisen randomly but rather as a strongly reinforcing set or pattern. Just a few moments of reflection reveals how powerfully reinforcing these values are: for example, personal growth may foster an ecological awareness which may prompt greater material simplicity and thereby allow greater opportunity for living and working at a smaller, more human scale which, in turn, may allow greater opportunity for local self-determination. No one value theme alone could create the vitality and coherence that emerges from the synergistic interaction of these values. To the extent that these values provide people with a realistic basis for both maintaining and surpassing themselves, they then constitute a practical "world view" — a coherent pattern of perception, belief, and behavior which could provide an important bridge between the traditional industrial world view and an uncertain and difficult social future.

What Voluntary Simplicity Is Not

We have been trying to define what voluntary simplicity is. We can also get a sense of voluntary simplicity by suggesting what it is not.

- Voluntary simplicity should not be equated with a back-to-nature movement. Although an historic shift in net population migration towards small towns and rural places is underway, the large majority of people continue to reside in urban environments. Voluntary simplicity seems perhaps as compelling for this urban majority as it does for the rural minority. An urban existence need not be incompatible with voluntary simplicity; indeed, many of the experiments with appropriate technology, intensive gardening, and such have been conducted in urban contexts.
- Although voluntary simplicity surely traces some of its contemporary heritage and vitality to the counterculture movement of the 1960s, its present constituency is certainly not limited to that group. Many of its adherents are of an age and background far removed from the proponents of the so-called "new values" a decade ago.
- Voluntary simplicity should not be equated with living in poverty. Indeed, impoverishment is in many ways the opposite of simple living in that poverty tends to make life a struggle to maintain oneself and provides little opportunity to surpass oneself.
- Voluntary simplicity is not a social panacea. It does imply social evolution towards what its adherents view as the minimal requirements for long term global survival but that does not itself cure the problems we confront; rather, voluntary simplicity may provide a basis from which societal responses with some long term hope for success can emerge.
- It is not a movement with heart but without the skills necessary to bring it to fruition. Among those who adhere to many of the tenets of voluntary simplicity are, in our estimation, some of the most creative and capable intellects, artists, and humanistic capitalists in the United States. Voluntary simplicity draws its ranks substantially from the well-educated, and, as such, has access to a rich pool of talent.
- Voluntary simplicity is not a social movement confined to the United States. Virtually all of the developed Western nations seem to be moving in a somewhat similar direction (although its expression may be altered by the cultural context and social experience). Many European nations, with more limited land and resources, have been learning how to cope with scarcity for far longer than the United States has. And there is evidence that other nations may be opting for voluntary simplicity rather than endure the stress of striving for affluence. For example, a recent poll in Norway found that "74 percent of the total sample claimed they would prefer a simple life with no more than essentials (these were, however, not defined) to a high income and many material benefits if these have to be obtained through increased stress."

- Voluntary simplicity is not a fad. Its roots reach far too deeply into the needs and ideals of people everywhere to be regarded as a transitory response to a passing societal condition.

The Push Toward Voluntary Simplicity

We have suggested that there is a strong pull towards voluntary simplicity. It seems to offer a practical, workable, and meaningful way of life for a small but significant segment of the population. Yet, despite the strength of this pull to voluntary simplicity, there is little reason to think that this way of life will grow to embrace substantial proportions of the population unless the pull is matched by substantial pushes. These twin elements of push and pull need to be considered if we are to assess the likelihood that voluntary simplicity will gather social momentum in the future. We turn, then, to consideration of whether society problems will push us in a direction similar to that exerted by the pull toward voluntary simplicity.

The range and diversity of contemporary societal problems is enormous. Space does not allow more than a cursory glance at some of the more prominent problems which may, in their eventual resolution, push us towards a simple way of life. These problems include:

- The prospect of running out of cheaply available, critical, industrial raw materials
- The prospect of chronic energy shortages and a difficult transition to a much more energy-efficient economy
- The growing threat that before we run out of material resources in any absolute sense we will pollute ourselves to death with the intrusion of many thousands of hazardous substances into our living environments and food chains
- Rising material demands of the third and fourth world, coupled with climatic changes which may induce periodic but massive famine in certain areas, coupled with the growing threat of terrorism (conventional, nuclear, biological), coupled with the growing vulnerability of the highly complex and interdependent technology (e.g., communications, energy, and transportation systems) common to developed nations
- The changing balance of global power, given rapid nuclear proliferation
- The poverty of abundance — growing dissatisfaction with the output of our industrial society as the sole or even primary reward and reason for our individual existences
- Challenge to the legitimacy of leaders in nearly all major institutions — both public and private
- Apparent loss of social purpose and direction coupled with rising levels of individual alienation
- Chronic and pervasive fiscal crises of many of our largest cities, coupled with an historic and unexpected turnaround in migration patterns (the net flow is now to small towns and rural areas)
- Decline in the expected number of meaningful work roles, coupled with growing levels of automation, coupled with chronic underemployment and unemployment

- The prospect that we have created social bureaucracies (at the federal, state, and local levels) of such extreme levels of scale, complexity, and interdependence that they now exceed our capacity to comprehend and, therefore, to manage them; coupled with growing protests that we are becoming an excessively overregulated society, coupled with growing demands upon government at all levels
- Growing demands that domestic economic inequities be moderated, coupled with the prospect of a little- or no-growth economy in the foreseeable future, yielding the spectre of intense competition for a fixed or slowly growing pie

Resolution of problems such as these will likely push our society in a direction which is more ecologically conscious, more frugal in its consumption, more globally oriented, more decentralized, more allowing of local self-determination, and so on. To some considerable extent, it appears that resolution of these increasingly serious problems will push in a direction at least similar to that implied by the pull toward voluntary simplicity.

III. Patterns & Dimensions Of Voluntary Simplicity

We think there are at least two very distinct kinds of people fully living the VS way of life. The first, and less numerous of the two, consists of a heterogeneous group of families and individuals who have voluntarily taken up simple living following years or decades of active involvement in the mainstream. The motivations of such people tend to be highly private and specific — desire to escape the "rat race," personal disillusionment, boredom with the job, the desire to live a less plastic life, and so on. Such changes in lifestyle make good copy and hence this type of phenomenon gets much publicity. In terms of numbers, this group does not appear very significant. However, as a model for others to emulate, this group may be profoundly important.

The other type tends to be younger, more motivated by philosophical concerns, more activist, and more given to promoting the VS view. Since no survey has yet been made explicitly for the purpose of defining the demographics of adherents to VS, we are forced to surmise their characteristics based on the attributes of related groups (such as environmentalists, consumerists, members of "human potential" movements, those operating Briarpatch businesses, etc.) on which some data are available. Based on this kind of inferential evidence, the second group of adherents to voluntary simplicity appears to be:

- Predominantly young, the large majority being in their 20s or 30s
- Evenly divided among the sexes
- Preponderantly single, although many young families are included
- Almost exclusively white
- From middle or upper class backgrounds
- Exceptionally well educated
- Bimodal in income, over a fourth (mostly students) having annual incomes under \$5,000 and another fourth having incomes over \$15,000

- Independent politically — uncomfortable with the standard labels
- Largely urban residents, although many would like to live in small town or rural environments

Number & Degrees Of Voluntary Simplicity

We have found it useful to think in terms of four distinct categories of voluntary simplicity:

1. Full Voluntary Simplicity — Our best guess is that only 4 to 5 million adults (3% of the adult population) fully and wholeheartedly live a life of voluntary simplicity. These people constitute the active, leading edge of the trend toward simple living and are found in all parts of the country. If we had to draw a caricature of the life-activities characteristic of this group it would include: organize gardening, recycling, natural foods, simple clothing, biking to work, backpacking on vacations, family oriented, engaging in meditation or other growth processes.

2. Partial Voluntary Simplicity — A second group we call "partial" adherents to voluntary simplicity. This group is probably about twice as large as the first (with some 8 to 10 million adults). These persons adhere to and act on some, but not all, of the basic tenets of voluntary simplicity. These persons are scattered throughout the adult population — probably a greater proportion of them are middle age and middle class, but they are still predominantly white and predominantly urban.

3. Sympathizers Toward Voluntary Simplicity — Polls cited later suggest that a large fraction of the total adult population — almost surely exceeding one-third and perhaps as large as one-half — sympathizes with many values associated with voluntary simplicity but, for one reason or another, this group does not presently act on this sympathy. We call these people sympathizers toward voluntary simplicity.

4. Indifferent, Unaware, Or Opposed To Voluntary Simplicity — Finally, we estimate that at least half of the population falls into the category of being indifferent to, unaware of, or opposed to voluntary simplicity. This group draws its numbers from both ends of the income spectrum. First there are those who are involuntarily simple — that is, who live in poverty and have not yet experienced the life of abundance. These people oppose VS because they are unwilling to forego the opportunity to strike it rich. Second, at the other income extreme, there are those who are strongly achievement oriented and see simple living as a threat to their style of life.

It appears that, of these four categories, the sympathizers will play a pivotal role. Their numbers are so large that they constitute a major reservoir of dormant support for voluntary simplicity. Depending upon the pushes and pulls that tug at our society as we make our way into the future, this way of life could have enormous growth potential, as we shall see later.

On what basis do we offer the foregoing estimates of numbers of adults in the various categories of voluntary simplicity? The estimates can be inferred by observing the ebbs and flows of related movements ranging from consumerism to concern with consciousness research. However, the dimensions of voluntary simplicity are most clearly indicated in a variety of opinion studies.

In a poll published in May 1976, the Roper organization found that 51% of Americans believe the nation "must cut way back" on production and consumption to conserve resources and keep the economy strong. Only 45% felt that traditional lifestyles can continue unchanged.

Louis Harris in late 1975 reported the following results from his polls. To reduce consumption of physical goods and products:

- 92% of Americans are willing to eliminate annual model changes in automobiles
- 91% are willing to forego meat for one day a week
- 90% are willing to do away with annual fashion changes in clothing
- 82% are willing to reduce the amount of advertising
- 73% are willing to wear old clothes (even if they shine) until they wear out
- 73% are willing to prohibit the building of large houses with extra rooms that are seldom used
- 57% are willing to see a national policy that would make it much cheaper to live in multiple-unit apartments than in single family homes

Harris concludes: "When the alternative is posed between changing our lifestyle to have less consumption of physical goods, on one hand, and enduring the risks of continuing inflation and unemployment on the other, by 77% to 8% the American people opt for a change in lifestyle."

A very different kind of study was reported in the final 1975 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. Asked to compare "Ideology I" (the traditional American way prizing most the values of rugged individualism, private property, and free competition in an open marketplace) with "Ideology II" (communalism in which the rights and duties of the individual are determined by the needs of the common good), U.S. readers preferred I to II by 70% to 29%. More important for this discussion, 36% thought Ideology II to be dominant today, 38% thought it more effective in solving problems in the future, and 73% thought it would dominate in the U.S. by 1985.

Concern with the inner life also has a very broad base of support. For example, the firm of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White finds that some 80% of the population is interested in developing better self-understanding through the inner search for meaning. A 1975 poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Corporation found that over 40% of American adults have undergone what they regard as a genuinely "mystical" experience. In 1974 Roper found that 53% of Americans believe in the existence of ESP — a belief, incidentally, that correlates strongly with education and income. A 1976

Gallup poll found that 12% of the American people are "involved in" or "practice" some mystical discipline.

Another indicator of support for VS is the fact that books like *Small is Beautiful*, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and *Limits to Growth* each have sold millions of copies.

Finally, one might point to the remarkable acceptance of California Governor Edmund Brown, Jr.'s personal and political posture with regard to frugality and ecology. Further, it seems significant that both President Carter and ex-President Ford have gone on record as supporters of the view that more is not necessarily better.

The foregoing data prove nothing, but as a set or pattern of evidence they do seem suggestive. They seem to indicate (1) a receptivity on the part of Americans to a change in lifestyle, (2) sympathy for values and attitudes congruent with voluntary simplicity, and (3) a wide base of interest in the inner dimension of life.

Prospects For Growth

A crucial question concerns the outlook for the growth of voluntary simplicity as a way of life. We estimate that the maximum plausible growth of VS would yield the following figures:

Maximum Growth Of VS

(Millions of Adults)

	1977	1987	2000
Full VS	5	25	60
Partial VS	10	35	60
Sympathizers	60	50	25
Indifferent or Opposed	75	60	55

These figures suggest that possibly 10 million adults follow VS tenets today (if we assume 5 million "full VS" plus 50% of "partial VS"). Their combined numbers could exceed 40 million by 1987 and 90 million by the year 2000. This is, for a basic sociological phenomenon, an extraordinary rate of growth. Even so, less than a third of the adult population would be fully living this way of life 23 years from now.

To attain the degree of growth shown in the table, we think several conditions would have to be present. First, the push pressures described earlier would have to continue to mount rather than decline. Efforts to overcome them would have largely to fail, for whatever reasons. At the same time, however, the nation would have to avoid a truly severe economic depression or else involuntary simplicity (i.e., poverty) would largely replace voluntary simplicity.

Second, VS would have to prove a rewarding and nourishing way of life to many millions of people who have little experience with the day-to-day realities of living simply. Attempts to live simply are sometimes abandoned because it doesn't yield the expected inner rewards, because it is too demanding or too lonely, or because changed family circumstances (e.g., having children) require a return to a less extreme lifestyle. Some observers feel that VS makes such large demands on both inner and external resources of people and is at such profound odds with traditional American achievement and material values that only a relative few will be able to live the simple life happily. Hence, they argue, VS will not prove a viable national solution to the problem it addresses. Other observers have no such qualms.

Third — and perhaps most important — a mass production, high-productivity sector of the economy will have to coexist with the VS sector in order to maintain standards of living; otherwise, the aggregate decline in living standards could be so great as to invite social and economic revolution. There appear to be no mechanical or philosophic reasons why frugality and simplicity cannot coexist with high technology and the profit motive. However, it is not clear whether or not antagonisms between the two life ways would permit the minimal — but essential — levels of cooperation.

Even if voluntary simplicity does expand in the coming quarter century to the degree indicated, it is not likely to emerge in the smooth fashion suggested by the numbers in the table. Rather, it will develop (to whatever extent) with jumps and drops and plateaus, reflecting a variety of specific events, perceptual insights, charismatic leaders, and many types of regulatory and legislative policies. It is also possible that voluntary simplicity will progress unobtrusively in the form of countless millions of small, unannounced decisions made so inconspicuously that almost no one is aware of the total effect until, suddenly, it is clear that a major values transformation has occurred.

IV. Future Social Implications

The long run social ramifications of voluntary simplicity — if it develops into a major social movement — are enormous. Widespread adoption of the social goals and characteristics implied by the value themes underlying voluntary simplicity would surely mark a deep and perhaps permanent alteration in the nature of the American dream. The eventual result could be the creation of a social order that is as different from the present as the industrial era was different from the Middle Ages.

The reason that the potential social implications are so vast is that voluntary simplicity does not represent merely an internal readjustment of the prevailing values pattern but

rather constitutes a fundamental shift in that pattern. Widespread adoption of this way of life could launch our society on a new developmental trajectory.

We are by no means suggesting that voluntary simplicity offers the only approach to a viable cultural and economic future. However, the United States and many other developed nations seem to be in a period of social drift. They appear to be losing both momentum and a sense of direction. People seem to be waiting for some leader or chain of events to make clear the nature of an alternative social vision. The uncertainty, indecision, and growing anxiety over appropriate social direction has prompted a new willingness to "think the unthinkable," to deeply consider what life means and where we wish to go. Voluntary simplicity as a coherent, broadly relevant, practical and purposeful world view could provide an important point of reference or anchoring point as our nation begins searching for and experimenting with new social forms.

Alternative Futures

Although VS as a way of life may have great and obvious long run significance, it seems at present to be struggling to achieve a critical mass of social awareness and acceptance. We have said that it could grow to major proportions by the year 2000. On the other hand, under some circumstances the movement could fade away. If we are to understand the prospects of voluntary simplicity, we must attempt to understand the nature and dynamics of the larger social context out of which this way of life could emerge.

There is great uncertainty regarding the future course of social evolution in the United States. Although the future is fundamentally uncertain, there are four alternative societal social futures which we feel bound much of the domain of social possibility over the next several decades. These are:

1. Technological Salvation — This is a future where, with good luck and great ingenuity, we find the social will and technological know-how to cope with critical national problems and continue along a trajectory of relatively high material growth. This future assumes that the value premises of the industrial era (rugged individualism, rationalism, material growth, etc.) will withstand current challenges and provide people with meaningful and workable living environments.

2. Descent Into Social Chaos — This is a future in which the society is torn by divisions and tensions among competing interest groups. There is no cataclysmic demise — just the grinding, unrelenting deterioration of the social fabric as crisis is compounded by crisis amidst diminishing public consensus as to how to cope with it all. Inept bureaucratic regulation and unforeseen events (such as severe climate changes) could change the drift toward social chaos into a rush.

3. Benign Authoritarianism — Despite the growing public pressure for and acceptance of the need for fundamental social change, the large, complex and highly interdependent bureaucracies in both public and private sectors could thicken and, like

slowly hardening concrete, lock people into an inescapable net of regulations and institution. This could be a benign authoritarianism which emerges from the unstoppable logic of well-intended bureaucratic regulation which seeps into nearly every facet of life.

4. Humanistic Transformation — One expression of this alternative could be a future in which the underlying value premises shift and two closely related ethics emerge. First is an ecological ethic that accepts our earth as limited, recognizes the underlying unity of the human race, and perceives man as an integral part of the natural environment. Second is a self-realization ethic that asserts that each person's proper goal is the evolutionary development of his fullest human potentials in community with others. Each ethic could serve as a corrective for possible excesses in the other. This could be a future that substantially embraces voluntary simplicity or some similar way of life that, though materially more modest than current lifestyles, is overall more satisfying.

These four thumbnail sketches of alternative futures present an enormous range of social possibility. Yet, to the extent that each of these is a plausible future, its seeds must exist in the present. Therefore, they need not be mutually exclusive social futures. For example, we can imagine a plausible future marked by both a humanistic transformation and by technological success (although it may be "appropriate" rather than "high" technology that underlies that success).

One way to test the viability of voluntary simplicity as an emergent way of life is to assess the extent to which it could assume a significant role in all four of these futures. In other words, is this a social movement that has relevance only in the context of a future of humanistic transformation, or could it plausibly play a major role in the other three futures as well?

A future marked by "technological success" would probably still require people to attack the problems of resource scarcity, environmental pollution, and global economic inequities by consuming less. To the extent that there is a continuing need to approach these and related problems from the demand side, there will be a corresponding role for voluntary simplicity even in this materially successful scenario.

In a society of growing internal strife and tension, voluntary simplicity could, in the short run, exacerbate that conflict. In the longer run, however, VS might help to alleviate social tensions. To the extent that voluntary simplicity provided a way of life that transcended traditional interest group conflicts and provided a meaningful and workable response to a worsening social condition, it could alleviate tensions by directing social energy in a more coherent and harmonious direction.

In a society marked by growing bureaucratic regulation and erosion of democratic processes, voluntary simplicity (with its emphasis on local self-determination, human scale, and self-sufficiency) could provide a health corrective and counterbalancing force. Voluntary simplicity could provide an important source of grass roots innovation and vitality to what otherwise could be an increasingly rigid and somber society.

The important point that we draw from this is not a prediction of the social future but rather noting the significance of voluntary simplicity in many alternative futures. To be sure, the size of this social movement would vary considerably depending on the social context into which it must fit. Nonetheless, there seems to be sufficient push and pull toward voluntary simplicity that it will not soon disappear from the social landscape.

Social Impacts

Assuming that voluntary simplicity will be a significant social force across a broad spectrum of societal futures, we now turn to consider the general nature of its impact. The discussion that follows is intended to be provocative rather than definitive — in hopes of stimulating further thought and comment.

What kind of society would emerge if voluntary simplicity were to become the predominant way of life? A partial answer to this question can be found by examining stereotypical contrasts between the value premises and social characteristics of the industrial "world view" and the voluntary simplicity "world view." Table 1 presents an illustrative array of contrasting value premises and social attributes. Several important insights emerge from this table. First, voluntary simplicity seems to constitute a broadly based attempt to moderate, in the short run, and transcend, in the long run, the industrial world view. Voluntary simplicity implies going beyond material growth to include evolution among more subtle (but no less important) dimensions of life. A second pattern revealed by this table is that the values cluster embraced by voluntary simplicity represents at least as coherent a world view as the industrial world view (which has powered our social vision and industrial development for nearly two centuries). Lastly, voluntary simplicity does not appear to be a movement whose domain of social impact can be narrowly defined; rather, it reaches out and touches a great many aspects of life.

Table 1
**Contrasts Between Industrial World View
& World View Of Voluntary Simplicity**

Emphasis in Industrial World View	Emphasis in Voluntary Simplicity World View
<i>Value Premises</i>	<i>Value Premises</i>
Material growth	Material sufficiency coupled with psycho-spiritual growth
Man over nature	People within nature
Competitive self-interest	Enlightened self-interest
Rugged individualism	Cooperative individualism
Rationalism	Rational and intuitive
<i>Social Characteristics</i>	<i>Social Characteristics</i>
Large, complex living and working	Smaller, less complex living and working

environments	environments
Growth of material complexity	Reduction of material complexity
Space-age technology	Appropriate technology
Identity defined by patterns of consumption	Identity found through inner and interpersonal discovery
Centralization of regulation and control at nation/state level	Greater local self-determination coupled with emerging global institutions
Specialized work roles — through division of labor	More integrated work roles (e.g., team assembly, multiple roles)
Secular	Balance of secular and spiritual
Mass produced, quickly obsolete, standardized products	Hand crafted, durable, unique products
Lifeboat ethic in foreign relations	Spaceship earth ethic
Cultural homogeneity, partial acceptance of diversity	Cultural heterogeneity, eager acceptance of diversity
High pressure, rat race existence	Laid back, relaxed existence

Table 1 can do little more than hint at the social implications of voluntary simplicity. Therefore, we turn to look deeper across a sampling of these dimensions. Presented below are some of the plausible, long run directions of social change that seem congruent with voluntary simplicity — assuming this way of life were adopted by a majority of the population.

National Tenor — A society in which a large proportion of the population adopts voluntary simplicity would probably have a uniquely different "feel" to it. Although admittedly speculative, we think that such a society would likely possess a greater sense of frontier spirit, a feeling of continuing challenge at the prospects of forging new, evolving relationships among individuals, societies, nature, and the cosmos. Although some would likely view this as an escapist retreat from problems or a faddish response to soon-to-be solved difficulties, overall the VS oriented society would have a high degree of cultural cohesion, social maturity, and social consensus. People would likely be settling in for the long haul and hence would have a greater sense of future destiny and the conviction they were working on behalf of future generations as well as for themselves. The culture would likely be more open, less tense and serious, and more tolerant. There might be a higher degree of and delight in social diversity. There would likely be a rebirth of a sense of geographic community and regional spirit and a grass roots renaissance in the arts.

Material Growth — Society would tend to move from a goal of material abundance to a goal of material sufficiency. What level of material sufficiency is appropriate would largely be decided by individual choice constrained by resource availability and prevailing cultural norms. Clearly, this presumes a strong cultural context with widely

shared beliefs as to what constitutes appropriate levels of material sufficiency. Although material growth may tend toward a steady-state condition, this need not imply a materially static society. With selective growth, some sectors of the economy would grow rapidly while others would contract. For example, growth in appropriate technology might be rapid while production of items of conspicuous consumption declines.

Human Growth — The society would tend to transfer its growth potential and aspirations from a material dimension to an increasingly nonmaterial dimension. This shift would be of the highest import if, as many suggest, our present problems arise in part from a gross disparity between the relatively underdeveloped internal faculties of man and the extremely powerful external technologies at his disposal. Society would attempt to achieve greater balance by fostering a degree of interior human growth that is at least commensurate with the enormous exterior growth that has occurred over the last several hundred years. This implies that our nation would increasingly become a trustee of conscious evolution on this earth, and, in doing so, endeavor to act with a level of awareness equal to the power and responsibility inherent in that role. The implication is that the nation's industrial prowess could provide, with suitable guidance, the material base to support the pervasive and intentional evolution of individual and socio-cultural awareness. Seen in this light, a trend toward voluntary simplicity is a logical evolutionary extension in our civilization growth.

Life Environment — Society would tend to shift from living and working in large, complex environments to living and working in smaller, less complex environments. Accompanying this might be migration from large cities to small cities, towns, and the country. Such trends would probably stimulate grass roots social action, revitalize the sense of community, and produce stronger, more distinctive clusters of neighborhoods.

Identity — The VS society would tend to define personal identity less in terms of consumption than in terms of one's awareness — psychological, social, spiritual. For many Americans consumption is not only an expression of identity but is basic to the sense of identity. The growth of voluntary simplicity would tend to produce a cultural perspective in which identity could be expressed in many other ways, such as experimenting with various forms of voluntary simplicity; developing vital communities through new forms of group and extended family relationships; exploring human consciousness through the hundreds of consciousness expanding disciplines, ranging from meditation, biofeedback, hypnosis, encounter, bioenergetics, and so on.

Technology — Society would tend to move from "high" or "space age" technology to the careful application of "intermediate" or "appropriate" technology. Just as the industrial era was built on high technology, the voluntary simplicity era would likely rely on technology that is explicitly designed to be ecologically sound, energy-conserving, low polluting, comprehensible by many, integrated with nature, and efficient when used on a small scale.

Politics — If voluntary simplicity were to emerge as a dominant way of life, much of its growth would likely be driven by political activism at a grass roots level. Extensive

decentralization of institutions would require that local communities take much greater responsibility for the well being of their population. Politics would probably assume a more humanistic orientation as people came to see the intimate connection that exists between the processes of personal growth and social change. Politics would thus be infused with a higher degree of honesty, compassion, and integrity. There might emerge new political coalitions and a greater number of political parties. There would also likely be greater self-righteousness; more frequent appeals to spiritual symbols in attempting to find political consensus; persistent tension between those holding the voluntary simplicity view and those adhering to the industrial world view; confusion concerning the equity and scope of programs conceived and administered at the local level; and so on. Overall, it probably would be a society in which political processes were more experimental, error embracing, and intentionally seeking diversity.

Global Environment — The emergence of an America dominated by the philosophy of voluntary simplicity would undoubtedly lead to many changes in international policies. A few are:

- Support for international bodies dealing with issues such as defense, food, energy, conservation, pollution, critical resources, regulation of nuclear activities, and so on
- Reduction in trade barriers and greater economic and technical assistance to developing nations
- Much more cultural interchange
- Moderation of power politics, with the U.S. attempting to exert moral rather than economic or military leadership

If our policies were successful, the U.S. might ultimately emerge as a symbol of human rights, a source of sophisticated aid in technological problems, and the leader in building a worldwide sense of unity among all peoples everywhere.

V. Business Implications

The advent of a large segment of the population acting fully or partially in accord with VS tenets would have a major impact on business. The highlights of these implications are sketched below.

Income Patterns

Our back-of-the-envelope estimates are that this way of life would not reduce Gross National Product as much as might be expected; rather, adoption of simple living by roughly a third of the adult population (such that their consumption levels were halved), in the year 2000 would, we think, reduce personal income available to consumers by only about 15% over our present levels. The biggest effect would likely be on the pattern of aggregate consumption and on moderating the level of growth.

Those businesses that view voluntary simplicity as an opportunity rather than a threat would likely find this to be perhaps the fastest growing consumer market of the coming decades. Our rough estimates (calculated at 100% of the spending of "full" VS consumers and 50% of "partial" VS consumers) suggest that consumption with a VS orientation could plausibly rise from about \$35 billion today to perhaps \$140 billion a decade hence, and to well over \$300 billion in 2000 (all in 1975 dollars). This growth seems more than ample to engage traditional business and also to support large numbers of new firms — such as the Briarpatch Network — started to serve VS consumers.

The growth of voluntary simplicity almost surely would lead to an increasingly bimodal income distribution. The enduring disparity between rich and poor in our society would likely grow in magnitude as VS income patterns (although motivationally quite different) would look increasingly like those who were involuntarily simple or poor. How long this gap would persist is an open question. For a substantial proportion of the population — and particularly the poor — we think an equitable redistribution of income would be a precondition for voluntary frugality.

Consumer Markets

As indicated earlier, VS consumption criteria are significantly different from traditional patterns. The person living the simple life tends to prefer products that are functional, healthy, nonpolluting, durable, repairable, recyclable or made from renewable raw materials, energy-cheap, authentic, esthetically pleasing, and made through simple technology. Such criteria will adversely affect many products of conspicuous consumption. On the other hand, the VS lifestyle should create excellent markets for such items as:

- First class durable products, such as solid wood furniture, high quality music and television systems, top-grade hand tools, geared bicycles
- Sturdy cotton and wool clothing deemphasizing fashion, which can be mended, handed down, and worn for years
- Do-it-yourself equipment for home construction, home repair and improvements, cooking, gardening, entertaining, and so on
- Inexpensive prefab "flexible" housing
- Easy-to-fix autos and appliances, perhaps using modular construction
- Healthy, "natural," unprocessed foods
- Self-help medical, childcare, housekeeping items
- Products for arts and crafts and other esthetic pursuits
- Simple, safe, nonplastic, nonmetal toys and games for children
- Products or services associated with shared tasks in communal living, cooperatives, recycling, and energy reduction and food conservation projects
- Leisure activities geared to country living
- Imaginative ways of refurbishing old city and country homes
- Traveling care repair and parts services
- Machines, equipments, and systems utilizing intermediate technology

Prices

Many prices would increase substantially to meet the qualitative demands of the market; the market will be unwilling to accept varying profit margins (i.e., profit will increasingly be based on a "cost-plus" basis) and will no longer tend to reflect the market's willingness to pay a premium for style, fashion, or fad. Price will more often be in terms of barter or "energy exchange." "Bulk" purchasing of nondurables should be anticipated as a frugal market response to unit pricing.

Outlets

A growing and appreciable portion of market activity will take place in the "alternative marketplace:" flea markets, garage sales, classified advertising, community bulletin boards. Consumer cooperatives and mailorder operations will increase as VS consumers become less willing to support superfluous merchandising costs. Purchases will be increasingly localized to diminish the costs of transportation and to encourage the utilization of intermediate technology. Specialty stores will likely increase, especially for food (home canning apparatus and utensils for greater self-sufficiency); shelter (energy conservation technology, materials-efficiency guidelines); and clothing (kits).

Promotion

New styles of advertising and promotion will tend to replace traditional types of sensational, emotional, and image appeals. Although an interesting and "aware" image will be important, the aim of advertising and promotion will be to help the consumer gain useful (rather than solely persuasive) information. The advertising will be more closely associated with the product or service being promoted. False or misleading advertising will be taken not as exaggerated puffery but as evidence of the advertiser's lack of concern for others — a message of "you versus us" instead of "we together." Appeals aimed at product quality, utility, durability, and service will likely be more successful, although the marketplace undoubtedly will have its share of "clique products." Keeping-up-with-the-Joneses will diminish in importance, but the popularity or market acceptance of a product will be an important promotional criterion.

Work Roles

In a simple living society the role of work would be downplayed as a status and power symbol and upgraded as a means of contributing to the collective good. Cooperation rather than competition would be the hallmark of work. Complaints would be directed more toward matters of ethics, social responsibility, and esthetics rather than issues of pay, office size, and promotion. Very likely there would be many more part-time jobs, enabling people to earn enough to fulfill their essential needs and yet have much more free time to pursue personal development and perhaps aid others. Significantly, management would tend to be highly participative, be organized around tasks, and be less hierarchical than at present. Ultimately, the traditional proprietary attitudes of business might yield to greater openness and inter- and intra-industry cooperation. The

aggressive expression of the profit motive (exemplified by "making a killing" rather than "making a living") — although it is not likely to vanish in the near future — would likely be a diminishing force in business.

Consumerism

It seems likely the advocates of voluntary simplicity will, as a consumer group, continue to exert political and economic pressure to change business and industrial practices. A trend toward VS implies no abatement of activist consumer movements directed toward such specific issues as safety, pollution, conservation, land use, ecological balance, and others. Some of these movements could have extensive implications for business. As individuals, VS people may very well try to influence business by buying in accord with rating criteria applied to long lists of specific branded products and specific manufacturers, retailers, banks, and the like. Such activities, accompanied by word-of-mouth publicity, might be one way in which adherents of voluntary simplicity will try to enforce their sense of social responsibility.

Voluntary Simplicity Business

We think it likely that in many parts of the nation small businesses run by VSers for the VS trade will flourish. The Briarpatch network in the San Francisco Bay area may prove to be one important template. Founded by Dick Raymond only a few years ago, the Briars have established several hundred individual firms in such areas as food and clothing stores, restaurants, book and magazine publishing (including *The CoEvolution Quarterly*), auto repair, baking, small-scale manufacture, child care centers, a toy company, etc. The Briarpatch network provides professional advice and services in a variety of domains including finance, advertising, insurance, charter flights, quantity purchasing, accounting and legal services, bartering opportunities, fund raising skills, and recruitment. The operating principles of Briarpatch businesses are significant. They include:

- Job sharing, in which two or more people are paid for one position
- Job swapping through which people can occasionally try out other positions
- Multiple jobs or roles, in which a person might be the bookkeeper as well as a board member
- Functions are generally performed without titles. If a title exists, it would probably be Facilitator instead of President, "She buys everything" rather than purchasing agent.
- Meditation is increasingly scheduled on the job
- If there are end-of-year surpluses, they are "recycled" in various ways. But generally there is a desire to help other projects rather than passive investors
- Directors serving as facilitators rather than watchdogs
- One favorite practice is to set prices according to the rule that the best price is what you would charge your friends

VI. Conclusions

The phenomenon we have called voluntary simplicity appears to be of deep social significance for three fundamental reasons. First, it is a concept and a way of life whose time seems at last to be arriving. The idea of voluntary simplicity has been discussed for millennia. However, our present era of relative abundance contrasts sharply with the material poverty of the past. The voluntary assumption of a life materially simple and nonmaterially rich, therefore, is not only increasingly psychologically acceptable but physically feasible for perhaps the first time in history for large numbers of people.

Second, it specifically addresses the critical issues of our times — the problems of ecosystem overload, alienation, unmanageable scale and complexity of institutions, worldwide antagonism, and so on. Voluntary simplicity is a creative, comprehensive, and holistic approach to a host of problems customarily considered to be separate. By coping simultaneously with scores of interrelated specifics, voluntary simplicity seems to provide a solution that could not be achieved via the one-by-one route.

Third, it meshes with the eternal needs of individuals to continue to grow. The emphasis on the inner life inherent in voluntary simplicity permits people to grow psychologically even if material growth may be denied by events beyond their control. Further, there is reason to think that the kind of growth fostered by voluntary simplicity is especially appropriate to our times and circumstances. In brief, the need of the individual uniquely matches the need of the society.

Of what other emergent life patterns can these things be said?